

What About Elders?

1. WHAT ARE ELDERS?

'Elder' is the term used most often to describe church leaders of the New Testament local church.

Elder – This is the English translation of the Greek work *presbuteros* which means someone who is advanced in life or one who is mature.

*Paul and Barnabas appointed **elders** (presbuterion) for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. – Acts 14:23*

There are also several other words that are used that also refer to church leaders.

Overseer/Bishop – The Greek word *episkopos* is often translated as either 'bishop' or 'overseer' in most English translations. Some translations also use the word 'guardian'. It refers to 'a man charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly; any curator, guardian or superintendent.'

*Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers** (episkopos), to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. – Acts 20:28*

Pastor/Shepherd - This is the most common term applied to elders in many Southern Baptist churches. It comes from the Greek word *poimen* which literally means a herdsman, esp. a shepherd; he to whose care and control others have committed themselves, and whose precepts they follow.

*And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as **pastors** (poimen) and teachers, - Ephesians 4:11 (This is the only place where it is translated pastor. All other occurrences of *poimen* are translated shepherd.)*

Steward – Steward is the English word most often translated from the Greek work *oikonomos*: one who is trusted to manage a household or household affairs.

*For the overseer (episkopos) must be above reproach as God's **steward** (oikonomos), ...- Titus 1:7*

Are all these different offices in the church? Not really. What is really interesting is that all of these terms refer to the same office. In Acts 20, Paul addresses the statement in v28 to the group he identifies as elders in v17:

*17From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the **elders** (presbuterion) of the church...*

*28Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers** (episkopos). Be **shepherds[pastors]** (poimen) of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.*

When Paul gives the qualifications for elders in Titus 1:5-7, he uses elders, overseer, and steward to refer to the same people:

*5The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint **elders** (presbuterion) in every town, as I directed you. 6An **elder** (presbuteros) must be blameless, the husband of but one wife, a man whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient. 7Since an **overseer** (episkopos) is a **steward** (oikonomos which is translated as steward or manager in other translations) ,...*

In 1 Peter 5:1-2, Peter also uses elder, overseer, and pastor to refer to the same group:

*¹ Therefore, as a fellow **elder** (presbuteros) and witness to the sufferings of the Messiah, and also a participant in the glory about to be revealed, I exhort the **elders** (presbuterion) among you: ² **shepherd** (or pastor from the Greek poimen) God's flock among you, not **overseeing** (episkopeo) out of compulsion but freely, according to God's will; not for the money but eagerly; - 1 Peter 5:1-2*

We can see that all of these terms apply to the same people. Why use all these different terms? I believe that God is not necessarily communicating titles but rather the roles and responsibilities of our church leaders. From all these words, we can see the duties of those who lead the local church:

- Presbuteros (elder) – one who is mature in their faith. How can you lead in the faith if you are not mature in the faith yourself?
- Episkopos (overseer/bishop) – one who has oversight responsibility
- Poimen (shepherd/pastor) – lead, feed, protect, and care for the flock
- Oikonomo (steward) – trusted to look after matters until the Master returns

The New Testament indicates that the local church is always led by a group of elders and not a single man. Elders are always referred to in the plural tense when addressing the local church. Here are just a few examples:

*When they had appointed **elders** for them in every church, - Acts 14:23*

*the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and **elders** concerning this issue. - Acts 15:2*

*When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the **elders** - Acts 15:5*

*From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the **elders** of the church. - Acts 20:17*

*And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the **elders** were present - Acts 21:18*

*The **elders** who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. - 1 Timothy 5:17*

*For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint **elders** in every city as I directed you, - Titus 1:5*

*Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the **elders** of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; - James 5:14*

*Therefore, I exhort the **elders** among you, as your fellow **elder** and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, - 1 Peter 5:1*

*Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the **overseers** and deacons: - Philippians 1:1*

The benefits of having a group of elders, rather than a single person include:

- functional, spiritual gift-based diversity in leadership
- Biblical accountability
- continuity in time of transition

2. WHAT ARE THE QUALIFICATIONS FOR ELDERS

The Biblical qualifications for elders come primarily from 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

¹ *This saying is trustworthy: "If anyone aspires to be an overseer, he desires a noble work."* ² *An overseer, therefore, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, self-controlled, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an able teacher,* ³ *not addicted to wine, not a bully but gentle, not quarrelsome, not greedy —* ⁴ *one who manages his own household competently, having his children under control with all dignity.* ⁵ *(If anyone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of God's church?)* ⁶ *He must not be a new convert, or he might become conceited and fall into the condemnation of the Devil.* ⁷ *Furthermore, he must have a good reputation among outsiders, so that he does not fall into disgrace and the Devil's trap. – 1 Timothy 3:1-7*

⁵ *The reason I left you in Crete was to set right what was left undone and, as I directed you, to appoint elders in every town:* ⁶ *someone who is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of wildness or rebellion.* ⁷ *For an overseer, as God's manager, must be blameless, not arrogant, not quick tempered, not addicted to wine, not a bully, not greedy for money,* ⁸ *but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, righteous, holy, self-controlled,* ⁹ *holding to the faithful message as taught, so that he will be able both to encourage with sound teaching and to refute those who contradict it. – Titus 1:5-9*

From these verses we can see the qualifications of elders are:

Desire to Serve as an Elder	Elders must feel God's calling to be a Spirit-led servant leader
Above Reproach	Elders must be blameless, presenting no patterns of scriptural disobedience or grounds for accusation.
Husband of One Wife	An elder, if married, must be a devoted spouse.
Temperate	Elders must be self-controlled, enslaved to nothing, free from excesses.
Prudent	Elders must be sober, sensible, wise, balanced in judgment, not given to quick, superficial decisions based on immature thinking.
Respectable	Elders must demonstrate a well-ordered life and good behavior.
Hospitable	Elders must be unselfish with their personal resources. They must be willing to share blessings with others.
Able to Teach	Elders must be able to communicate the truth of God and exhort sound doctrine in a non-argumentative way. (2 Timothy 4:2; 2:24)
Not Addicted to Wine	Elders must be free from addictions and must be willing to limit their liberty for the sake of others.

Not Pugnacious	Elders must be gentle and characterized by forbearance and tenderness – not having a quick temper.
Uncontentious	Elders must not be given to quarreling or selfish argumentation.
Free from the Love of Money	Elders must not be stingy, greedy nor driven by monetary gain. They should not be preoccupied with amassing material things, but rather should be a model of giving.
Manage Own Household	Elders must have a well-ordered household, a healthy family life, and well-behaved children (pertains to those whose children still live under parental authority).
Not New Converts	Elders must not be new believers. They must have been Christians for long enough to demonstrate the reality of their conversion and depth of their spirituality.
Good Reputation with Outsiders	Elders must be well respected by unbelievers.
Not Self-willed	Elders must not be stubborn, insensitive or prone to force opinions on others.
Not Quick Tempered	Elders must exercise patience and self-control in difficult situations.
Loves What Is Good	Elders must desire the will of God in every decision.
Just	Elders must be fair and impartial. Their judgments must be based on scriptural principles.
Devout	Elders must be reverent, continually desiring to be separated from sin. They must be devoted to prayer, the study of Scripture and the guarding of their own spiritual walk (Acts 20:28).
Holding Fast the Faithful Word	Elders must be stable in the faith, obedient to the Word of God, continually seeking to be controlled by the Holy Spirit

3. WHAT DO ELDERS DO?

¹ Therefore, as a fellow elder and witness to the sufferings of the Messiah, and also a participant in the glory about to be revealed, **I exhort the elders among you:** ² **shepherd God's flock among you, not overseeing out of compulsion but freely, according to God's [will]; not for the**

money but eagerly;³ not lording it over those entrusted to you, but **being examples to the flock.**⁴ And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. – 1 Peter 5:1-4

Shepherd and oversee the local church

What does a shepherd do for his sheep?

- Leads them

The elders constantly assess the strengths and weaknesses of the local church and set the vision and direction of the church. Elders monitor the spiritual condition of the flock and take action to bring them into peak spiritual health

- Feeds them

This is why elders, as opposed to deacons, must have the ability to teach. They are responsible for ensuring that the flock is fed on a spiritually healthy diet from God's Word.

- Protects them

Elders are to be vigilant to threats from inside and outside the flock and take steps necessary to protect the flock.

These verses also tell us what a shepherd is not. In their role as shepherds, elders are not to rule or lord over the local church. As stewards, elders are to manage the household while the Master is away. They are to lead the church on behalf of the true Shepherd, Jesus Christ. In all things the elders must seek out the intent and mind of the Master.

Set the example for the local church

In all ways, the leaders of the local church are to set the example but especially in those areas that are mentioned in 1 Timothy and Titus as qualifications: personal conduct and spiritual leadership in the home.

The Bylaws Review Team will recommend that we move toward an elder-led model of church governance. This is not to be confused with an elder-ruled model. Elders lead by example by following Christ's model of servant leadership and always seeking the mind of Christ for direction and guidance. In the elder-led church, the congregation is final authority on all matters. We can see examples of how an elder-led church functions in Acts 6 and 15.

4. WHERE DO ELDERS COME FROM?

Elders are elected from the congregation.

*23Paul and Barnabas **appointed** elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. – Acts 14:23*

'Appointed' may not be the best English translation here. In our modern English vernacular, the word 'appointed' would seem to mean that Paul and Barnabas decided who the elders would be for each local congregation. However, the Greek word used here is *cheirotoneo* which means:

- to vote by stretching out the hand
- to create or appoint by vote: one to have charge of some office or duty
- to elect, create, appoint

The implication is that there was some type of election of these elders by the local churches at the direction of Paul and Barnabas.

Elders can, and should, be a mixture of paid vocational ministers and laymen. How they make their living isn't nearly as important as to their calling and their function.

5. WHAT ABOUT DEACONS?

Some may ask, 'If we have elders, then do we still need deacons?' The answer is: absolutely. It is clear from Scripture that the deacons are called to be the servant-ministers of the New Testament church. We discovered that of all the groups in our church, the deacons are done the greatest disservice in our existing bylaws. Their roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined and those that are specified are often contradictory or clearly not what Scripture intends. It is our desire to have bylaws that free the deacons to be the servant-ministers that God has called them to be by providing leadership and oversight of the service ministries of our church. Without active, vibrant, and effective service ministries for our church and our community, we cannot hope to fulfill God's calling.

Effective elders and deacons are required for a healthy New Testament local church.